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Evolution of Occupational Therapy Practice: Life History of Mary Hager

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### **Abstract**

*Objective:* The purpose of this qualitative study using a life history approach is to provide current and future generations of occupational therapists a view of the history and how occupational therapy practice has evolved from its inception to current practice through the life history stories of occupational therapists who have held leadership roles at the national level and beyond.

*Method:* A semi-structured phone interview was conducted between the student researchers and Mary Hager, a retired occupational therapist. The interview was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim prior to data analysis. Codes, categories, and themes were synthesized from the interview to comprehend a deeper understanding of turning points and accomplishments in Mary's life.

*Results:* A data analysis was conducted by collapsing the provided information into codes, categories, and themes. The categories of collaborating, challenges, opportunities, and leadership emerged, then led to a final assertion.

*Conclusion:* Throughout Mary's career, collaborating, growing from challenges, opportunities, as well as situations where leadership could flourish, had an impact on the type of experiences she had and the competencies she developed while working in educational and political settings.

### **Introduction**

This life history is one of 30 life history interviews, which are part of a larger project, *Histories of Individuals Who Have Been Influential in Developing Occupational Therapy (OT) at the National Level and Beyond*. The purpose of this study is to provide current and future generations of occupational therapists a view of the history and how occupational therapy practice has evolved from its inception to current practice through the life history stories of occupational therapists who have held leadership roles at the national level and beyond. It is anticipated that the life history process will be a powerful way to gather this information. The interview took place at the University of North Dakota School of Medicine and Health Sciences building, where the student researchers conducted the interview via phone call with the participant. The participant was located in the comfort of her home office for the duration of the interview. The semi-structured interview was part of a larger qualitative research study completed by two occupational therapy students.

### **Literature Review**

Centered on the participant's time in practice, a literature review was completed comparing the shifts in practice with her personal turning points. The first decade of her career was indicated by a shift in professional identity, as the field of occupational therapy transitioned from relying on other professions for its distinct role to transition into an independent profession of its own (Reed & Peters, 2008). In 1978, West Virginia obtained statewide licensure for the profession of occupational therapy, as well as the development of the first occupational therapy educational programs in the state (West Virginia Occupational Therapy Association [WVOTA],

2019). According to Reed and Peters (2008), the transition to state licensure enhanced occupational therapy's image, by acknowledging private payers, further acknowledging public programs, and essentially developing an official legal definition of occupational therapy.

As the profession of occupational therapy continued to transform its identity, theoretical concepts and research hypotheses began to evolve. The Sensory Integration and Praxis Tests (SIPT) was an important turning point, not only in relation to the theory of sensory integration but also for the entire occupational therapy profession (Mailloux, 1999). Although these tests were often criticized for their reliability factors, they were used widely by occupational therapists, who used them to assess children (Mailloux, 1999).

According to the American Occupational Therapy Association (2009), the opportunity for additional knowledge and skills became available to therapists through workshops, publications, mentoring, and post-graduate certifications in Sensory Integration (SI), including administering and interpreting the SIPT. SI theory became an important part of the education setting. During the 1970's, Sensory Integration within occupational therapy was primarily focused on evaluations and interventions that were designed to identify, prevent, and remediate deficits related to child sensitivities, sensory-perceptual skills, and motor and praxis skills, and related patterns of performance (as cited in American Journal of Occupational Therapy [AJOT], 2009). While SI theory continued to evolve, occupational therapy practitioners helped children with sensory-related issues that affect their ability to access the general and special education curriculum (AJOT, 2009).

### **Theory**

Throughout the research procedure, the Kawa model was integrated into the life history approach. The Kawa model allowed for an in-depth view of the turning points that occurred

throughout the participant's career and key elements that influenced her accomplishments.

According to Turpin and Iwama (2011), the Kawa model is grounded in the metaphor of a river and its elements, where the river water represents the life source or energy of life. The river water signifies a person or a group of individuals (Turpin & Iwama, 2011). While different contexts influence an individual's life, the context of the river molds its shape and flow. The river walls and floor signify the social and physical environments that encompass the individual. The rocks that are amongst the river signify life circumstances that result in numerous challenges and can hinder the life flow centered on how large or small they are. As the rocks signify the river, they too have numerous sizes and shapes that have varying influences on the flow of the water. The driftwood signifies personal traits and resources that can increase or decrease an individual's circumstances. Lastly, the space between obstructions where the water or life energy flows signifies the capability to partake in life and retains the scheme that spaces can increase by shifting or reducing the sizes of the other river elements to enhance involvement in occupations of an individual's life (Turpin & Iwama, 2011).

The Kawa model, its concept of the river and the elements that reside within it, allowed for the interview process to unfold naturally. Furthermore, the Kawa model concentrated on how the participant's contributions, challenges, and opportunities enhanced or hindered professional growth and development throughout her time in and out of practice. In addition, the data analysis process was impacted by the Kawa model through the development of themes and assertions that concentrated on significant turning points that impacted her career and altered her life flow. The Kawa model was essential in helping the researchers describe the participant's complete story of her time as an occupational therapist.

### **Description of Participant**

By utilizing a semi-structured interview and reviewing Mary's well-rounded curriculum vitae (CV), the researchers were able to reveal important achievements, opportunities, and significant turning points that had occurred throughout her life.

Mary's passion and desire to become an occupational therapist-led her to the University of Wisconsin - Madison, where she later received her Bachelor's of Science in Occupational Therapy. After graduating, Mary moved from Madison, WI to Charleston, WV, where she began her career at Charleston Area Medical Center (CAMC) as a Chief occupational therapist. Within the same time frame, she worked at the Cerebral Palsy Clinic of Charleston, later becoming the director of the occupational therapy department. During this time period, she was able to re-establish the occupational therapy departments at CAMC and the Cerebral Palsy Clinic of Charleston. As Mary carried on her career in Charleston, she was approached by a small group of occupational therapists who invited her to join the West Virginia Occupational Therapy Association (WVOTA), to be a part of the early licensure effort across the United States. Mary took on the opportunity and began her involvement in several emerging changes for the profession, such as bringing in an occupational therapy program to West Virginia University and an occupational therapy assistant program to Beckley, WV.

Years later, a major turning point in her life was presented as she shifted to the education setting and gained employment in the Kanawha County schools. Through this opportunity, she was able to obtain new skills and gain further knowledge in the area of school-based occupational therapy.

While Mary transitioned to the education setting, she soon realized she found her forte. As Mary became familiarized with being the only occupational therapist within the school system of an entire county, she soon realized the need for occupational therapy in the education

setting. From this, she began the effort to develop the very first occupational therapy program within the schools of West Virginia. As time moved forward, and changes were in place for the new program, Mary chose to obtain her Masters of Arts Degree in Special Education to advance her career and credibility in the education setting further.

As Mary continued to work in the schools, she also realized the need for SI theory for students with sensory challenges. Her passion for working with students with various sensory challenges shined through, as she took on the opportunity to take advanced courses in theory and treatment of Sensory Integration from Sensory Integration International (SII). After completing several courses, she received a certification in Sensory Integration and Praxis Theory. Using her certification and degrees to her advantage, Mary presented in-services to occupational therapists, physical therapists, parents, and teachers on fine motor activities, school-based practice, sensory-motor ideas, technology, and the benefits of volunteering using occupational therapy skills. During her time in the educational setting, Mary was awarded the Kanawha County Schools Award of Recognition as her skills and passion were evident to those around her.

Though being a school-based occupational therapist was important to Mary, another turning point in Mary's life was taking on several new leadership roles within WVOTA and the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA). In 1978, Mary was elected President of WVOTA, where she carried out her duties over her tenure of fourteen years. She then transitioned to being the Vice President of WVOTA, then Secretary and Treasurer of WVOTA. On a national level, Mary has served on the AOTA Representative Assembly as a Representative and an Alternate Representative for West Virginia, where she fulfilled her duties over her tenure of twenty-three years.



As of today, Mary serves as the AOTA Representative Assembly Recorder. Throughout her time in WVOTA and AOTA, Mary was awarded the WVOTA Service Award, and the AOTA Service Award seven different times, as her desire and abilities were apparent to those surrounding her. In her last years as a practicing OT, Mary continued her work as a school-based OT, completing her career in the education environment where she found her original niche as an OT. Today, Mary continues her work with WVOTA as a Co-Chair of the Legislative and State Affairs Committee.

### **Methodology**

The study conducted was qualitative in nature. The researchers used a qualitative life history approach to gain an understanding of turning points within the participant's career and their involvement in the evolution of occupational therapy practice. The participant was selected from a participant list, compiled through purposive sampling by the project directors. Informed consent was obtained prior to the interview, and the UND Institutional Review Board reviewed the project. Because of the study design, the formal IRB process was waived. The semi-structured interview was guided by an interview schedule prepared by the project directors; the questions on the interview schedule were designed to be used with all the individuals interviewed as part of the larger project. The student researchers were allowed to modify or add interview questions as needed for each specific interview.

The project directors had made previous contact with the participant, which allowed for the student researchers to carry out the study once the participant agreed to participate. The data collection process included obtaining the participant's CV via email, which was received after the interview was completed. Background data were collected and revised before carrying out

the interview, which took approximately one hour. A semi-structured interview schedule was used to gather qualitative data about the participant's life history related to her career in OT. The interview lasted approximately an hour in length. The semi-structured interview took place at the University of North Dakota's School of Medicine and Health Sciences through a phone call between the student researchers and the participant. The participant was in the comfort of her home office for the duration of the interview.

Trustworthiness was verified by utilizing verbatim transcription. Two student researchers completed the coding process, which dismissed the means for bias in coding and data analysis. The use of peer reviews during the coding and transcription process was utilized to dismiss any further bias or errors. Cross-checking data with the participant's CV allowed for a type of member-checking. Finally, by keeping a reflexive journal throughout the research process, the student researchers were able to track their opinions and perceptions, which allowed for discovery and dismissal of any biases. The procedures also enabled the student researchers to have a better understanding of the study at hand, as it allowed for a more in-depth reflection of what was transpiring overall.

### **Data Analysis**

During the data analysis process, the interview was audiotaped and transcribed verbatim, which led to the development of 26 codes (see appendix). These were then collapsed into categories and corresponding themes to comprehend a deeper understanding of turning points and accomplishments in Mary's life. The transcription process included a reflexive journal that captured personal thoughts, feelings, and impressions, as the progression through the qualitative research process unfolded. The researchers received assistance in the finalization of the data analysis process from the course instructors at the University of North Dakota School of

Medicine and Health Sciences. Inclusion criteria comprised of information that supported the creation of the life history project and was highlighted on numerous accounts throughout the interview process. Exclusion criteria comprised of information that was not pertinent to the achievement of the research project, or information that was mentioned only momentarily.

The data analysis and interview process were led by the Kawa model, which provided an in-depth look into the participant's career, significant turning points, and contributing factors that enhanced or hindered professional growth and development. The prominence of the Kawa model allowed for the data analysis process and presentation findings to comprehend Mary's life on a personal and professional level, which allowed for a deeper, richer understanding overall.

### **Findings and Results**

During Mary's career, several important achievements, opportunities, and professional accomplishments allowed for her to remain a successful occupational therapist. Her desire to advocate for the profession, carry out various leadership roles, and share her knowledge of Sensory Integration Theory in the school setting allowed her to flourish further.

According to Teoh and Iwama (2015), the flow of an individual's river is a metaphor for their life journey. The Kawa Model was used to guide the data analysis by creating four categories centered around the constructs of the river, such as challenges, environment, and supports. To understand Mary's life, these various aspects are apparent throughout each of the themes. The timeline guided the data analysis process by allowing the student researchers to complete an archive search of significant literature related to key events in Mary's life. Relevant articles set the stage for the study, as Mary shared several turning points in her life that influenced her time in practice.

The categories and themes outlined below represent a brief illustration of significant turning points that highlight Mary's career as an occupational therapist. The categories consisted of Collaboration, Challenges, Opportunities, and Leadership.

### **Collaboration**

Mary spoke about the ability to collaborate with other professions during her time in practice, and how much of an impact it had on her life. In several cases, she spoke about the importance of collaborating with others on an interdisciplinary team, which provided better outcomes for the client as a whole.

*Theme 1:* The first theme stated, throughout Mary's career, collaboration was key to her success. Whether it be on an interpersonal level between coworkers, on a national level, or with her clients.

When the student researchers asked about how challenges impacted her, and her ability to succeed, Mary stated, "...we talked about collaboration, how some of the best things that happened when you could get things carried over in the classroom." In this quote, Mary explained the importance of working with other professionals in an educational setting to reach a common goal for each client.

*Theme 2:* While working with others, Mary has fostered a strong learning environment where individuals can solve problems quickly and effectively.

Mary reiterated that the most efficient way to solve a problem can often be through collaboration with others. When asked about overcoming challenges within her work in the school system, Mary stated, "I was very fortunate to have a physical therapist who was wonderful to work with...I think having her be such a great team member helped so much with being able to work on things with the students." Mary described how her success with helping

students reach their goals, was amplified when the student was able to show progress in more than one context.

*Theme 3:* Mary expressed a willingness to hear others' thoughts and opinions in order to understand their viewpoint, which is vital to prioritizing goals and reaching them.

Mary described having a willingness to try and understand others as being vital towards collaboration. She stated, "You find yourself working with speech therapy and physical therapy in a very collaborative way because I think the school system lends itself to if you want to try to succeed, you have to be able to work together across disciplines." When Mary took the time to understand other professionals and their role in the school system, she was able to see the benefit of working alongside them.

## **Challenges**

Throughout Mary's career, she experienced numerous challenges that allowed her to meet the demands of various job roles. Mary shared that the challenges that she went through also provided her with room to grow as a new practitioner.

*Theme 1:* Challenges that were faced as a new practitioner facilitated Mary's professional and personal development and growth.

Mary stated that demands of her job role and the prioritizing of time as a school OT was "just being me and the school system of an entire county, and at times you try to cover an entire county of 27 schools in a week...and that sometimes was a real challenge." As Mary saw the demands of her job role as a challenge, she also emphasized the importance of the learning process as a novice practitioner. During her time in the education setting, Mary stated, "maybe

it's just one of those things as a new therapist you just have to see for yourself because people can tell you and tell you, you know, oh avoid this, avoid that, be sure you do this. But I think, I think sometimes you just gotta live some of it."

*Theme 2:* Mary believed in working with other professionals in the school setting by incorporating the use of sensory integration, to advocate for occupational therapy throughout the educational setting.

Since Mary's background and certification in Sensory Integration and Praxis Theory were vital to the education setting, she was able to get an inside look at how students could benefit from sensory integration techniques in the classroom. She was then able to work with other school professionals, such as teachers, to incorporate sensory integration into the classroom. About this topic, she stated, "...talking with the teachers and seeing things from their perspective and then for me being able to explain to them about occupational therapy, and I think that when I went into the classrooms, it gave me even more credibility...because I think many of the teachers felt like this person has an idea of where we're coming from."

*Theme 3:* The process of identifying solutions to difficult or complex issues, allowed for productive growth in Mary's job role as a school-based occupational therapist.

When asked to describe one of the most challenging experiences Mary had as an OT, Mary stated, "OTs often weren't given prime space in the schools to work, and sometimes you were lucky to get closet space, so I guess it has to do with collaboration when you could get things carried over into the classroom." Mary also stated, "I remember I was able to help get a grant for rocking chairs, and I guess I have always been a little bit proud of that because in the preschool classroom for instance, I was able to say 'well you know if we had a little rocking

chair in the classroom that might really help this particular student” and the school system saying to me that they would help fund the idea.’

### **Opportunities**

Mary shared that the opportunities she was given helped shape her abilities and skills as a practitioner in the field of occupational therapy. She spoke of various opportunities that led the student researchers to believe that she was very humbled by them, as it allowed her to grow and learn in various settings.

*Theme 1:* Professional support throughout Mary’s career creates an outlet that cultivates a desire to be involved in more than the minimal requirements.

Mary’s desire to be involved in the profession stemmed from the positive experiences she had while starting as a novice practitioner. She described her working environment as inclusive and beneficial to her growth as a practitioner. Mary stated, “Some of the positive aspects are comradery and the opportunity to meet people from other states which is important in knowing you are not alone, and for the sharing of ideas.” This statement was made by Mary when she was asked about what positive aspects she experienced when encountering various leadership opportunities.

*Theme 2:* Several opportunities that have supported Mary’s learning and ability to advocate for others, have presented her with strong feelings of gratitude.

When asked how Mary views her contributions to the profession of occupational therapy, she expressed feelings of gratitude. Mary stated, “I was fortunate enough to be in the right place at the right time. I guess that sounds silly in some ways, but it really shows me that I had the opportunity and was able to be a part of it.”

*Theme 3:* Mary was able to see the benefits of professional and personal connections that could be established through active involvement, learning, and advocating.

Mary expressed her opinion about the efficacy of occupational therapy and how occupational therapy is different than other professions. Mary described the transition back to occupation from the biomedical model as a necessity for the practice of occupational therapy to survive. She stated, "...OT and the OTA in school and then being able to get more people in practice, I feel not only gave OT a much more visible presence in the state, but also secured OT so that many other professions were not able to gobble up the practice of OT."

### **Leadership**

Mary shared that the various leadership opportunities she took part in, had impacted how she was able to advocate and stand up for the profession of OT. She spoke of numerous leadership roles and responsibilities, which allowed her to promote and develop new programs and ideas, and participate in lawmaking.

*Theme 1:* Various leadership opportunities have allowed Mary to take part in building and advocating the profession of occupational therapy.

Mary explained to the student researchers that during her time as a practitioner, West Virginia only had a handful of practicing OTs. She stated, "the few people that were there were so dynamic and wanted to spread occupational therapy so desperately, and so opportunities of being able to contact the governor of the state, and contact the legislators, and saying not only is OT needed but this is how come they are needed." She shared her passion for program promotion and development as she went on to share, "when I first came into the state there wasn't an OT program or an OTA program at all, and so the few of us worked so hard to even bring programs into the state...so the OT program at WVU came first, and the OTA program in



Beckley came second.” Throughout the development of both programs, Mary stated. “I was on the legislative committee to help secure licensure for West Virginia, so I was very fortunate to be able to help write the bill, the licensure bill. I was able to visit the state capital many times, and I was able to talk with many legislators.”

*Theme 2:* By remaining an active member on a state or national committee, Mary can continue to transform and influence future policy changes.

Mary explained how she hopes to remain active on a state and national level, even if it were to be in a much smaller capacity. She stated, “right now I’m a retired occupational therapist, and I’m still doing volunteering...right now I’m the recorder for the representative assembly, and I am part of AOTA and still very active in WVOTA.”

*Theme 3:* By building professional relationships with others, Mary was able to share ideas and foster a feeling of goodwill and familiarity among others from various regions of the country.

When asked to share the positives of holding a leadership position, Mary explained that having an impact on national policy, and being able to meet other people in the profession that are leaders meant a lot to her. She stated, “learning from leaders, and I think there’s always been value if you’re a leader with more experience, being kind to those that aren’t quite as experienced..., and the value really does go both ways...so I’d say you always are constantly learning from each other.”

The developed categories and themes have led to a final assertion that throughout Mary’s career, collaborating, growing from challenges, opportunities, as well as situations where leadership could flourish, had an impact on the type of experiences she had and the competencies she developed while working in an educational and political setting.

## **Discussion**

Throughout Mary's career, collaborating, growing from challenges, opportunities, as well as situations where leadership could flourish, had an impact on the type of experiences she had, and the competencies she developed while working in an educational and political setting.

While working as an occupational therapist for forty-four years in a variety of settings, Mary was able to witness major turning points in the profession of occupational therapy. In 1978, West Virginia confirmed statewide licensure for the profession of occupational therapy, as well as the development of the first occupational therapy educational programs (West Virginia Occupational Therapy Association [WVOTA], 2019). After graduating, Mary moved from Madison WI, to start her career in West Virginia, as an occupational therapist at Charleston Area Medical Center and the Cerebral Palsy Clinic of Charleston. As her physical context changed from one state to the next, the Kawa model would imply that her professional identity grew and developed, as well as her role and responsibilities within various settings (Turpin & Iwama, 2011). As the transition to state licensure developed, the licensing requirements enhanced occupational therapy's image, which influenced Mary's future career.

Within the first ten years of her career, a shift in professional identity emerged as occupational therapy went from relying on other professions for its distinct role to transitioning into an independent profession of its own (Reed & Peters, 2008). This paradigm shift guided Mary as she began her career in the hospital setting, and later in the educational and political setting. By applying the Kawa model, the support throughout Mary's social context was developed early on as a practitioner. Therefore, her life flow was heightened allowing her to further advocate for the necessity and usefulness of occupational therapy in the state of West Virginia.

As Mary's career continued to grow, another turning point emerged as she transitioned into the education setting. She later became certified in Sensory Integration and Praxis Theory. Although this theory was new to the education setting, Mary believed in working with other school professionals, to help children with sensory-related issues that affected their ability to access the general and special education curriculum (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 2009). Mary's dedication in the education setting led her to continue advocating for the profession, as she continues to serve as a Recorder for AOTA, and on the Legislative Chair for WVOTA. As the driftwood within the Kawa Model signifies Mary's personal attributes, it became obvious that her desire to collaborate with others, help children with sensory-related issues, and her ambition to advocate for the profession within her current roles have made a powerful impact in her life and for the profession. Each attribute described, provided Mary with the opportunity to accomplish and achieve much in her life. This would later impact the future of occupational therapy. Overall, Mary's time as an occupational therapist was witness to multiple transitions in the profession, which challenged her career. This, however, essentially advanced her professional growth and development.

Mary's willingness to participate in the life history research study has added to the literature on the history of occupational therapy. This was completed by examining several challenges that the profession has undergone throughout the years, and how those challenges were eventually conquered. By exploring the various experiences that Mary faced in her career, the student researchers were able to acquire a greater understanding of her abilities that influenced the profession. The experiences Mary endured will offer current and future generations the insight and knowledge of how far the profession has come. Furthermore,

contributions Mary has made will continue to support the field of occupational therapy as it continues to enable people of all ages to live life to its fullest.

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## Appendix

**Evolution of Occupational Therapy Practice: Life History of Mary Hager**

Mary Hager, MA, OTR/L, FAOTA; Allison Moran, OTS; Grace Spanos, OTS

Collaboration	Challenges	Opportunities	Leadership
↓	↓	↓	↓
<b>Codes:</b> Desire to learn, interests, understanding, conflict resolution, role description, keeping an open-mind, collective goals, priorities	<b>Codes:</b> Problem-solving, cooperation with other professions, novice practitioner, demands of job role, learning process, prioritizing time	<b>Codes:</b> Gratefulness, involvement, desire, opportunities to advocate, learning opportunities, support, goal-directed	<b>Codes:</b> Participation in law-making, active committee member, advocating for the profession, program development, and promotion, professional connections, impact on policy changes
<b>Theme:</b> Throughout Mary's career, collaboration was key to her success, whether it be on an interpersonal level between co-workers, on a national level, or with her clients.	<b>Theme:</b> Challenges that were faced as a new practitioner facilitated Mary's professional and personal development and growth.	<b>Theme:</b> Professional support throughout Mary's career creates an outlet that cultivates a desire to be involved in more than the minimal requirements.	<b>Theme:</b> Various leadership opportunities have allowed Mary to take part in building and advancing the profession of occupational therapy.
<b>Theme:</b> While working with others, Mary has fostered a strong learning environment where individuals can solve problems quickly and effectively.	<b>Theme:</b> Mary believed in working with other professionals in the school setting by incorporating the use of sensory integration, to advocate for occupational therapy throughout the educational setting.	<b>Theme:</b> Several opportunities that have supported Mary's learning and ability to advocate for others, have presented her with strong feelings of gratitude.	<b>Theme:</b> By remaining an active member on a state or national committee, Mary can continue to transform and influence future policy changes.
<b>Theme:</b> Mary expressed a willingness to hear others' thoughts and opinions in order to understand their viewpoint, which is vital to prioritizing goals and reaching them.	<b>Theme:</b> The process of identifying solutions to difficult or complex issues, allowed for productive growth in Mary's job role as a school-based occupational therapist.	<b>Theme:</b> Mary was able to see the benefits of professional and personal connections that could be established through active involvement, learning, and advocating.	<b>Theme:</b> By building professional relationships with others, Mary was able to share ideas and foster a feeling of goodwill and familiarity among others from various regions of the country.

**Assertion Statement:** Throughout Mary's career, collaborating, growing from challenges, opportunities, as well as situations where leadership could flourish, had an impact on the type of experiences she had and the competencies she developed while working in educational and political settings.